

C. Introduction

The Somerville Historic Preservation Commission recently completed a major survey of historic buildings across the City. This Report presents the results of this research and describes the buildings proposed for designation as Local Historic Districts.

For long-time residents and newcomers alike, neighborhoods are the defining characteristic of life in Somerville. Today, Somerville's well-loved neighborhoods are under mounting pressure from changes that are often outside the City's control. With rising gasoline prices and the growing attractiveness of urban lifestyles, Somerville's proximity to Boston is no longer the "best-kept secret," bringing both positive and adverse changes for its residents and businesses. Over the past decade, Somerville's neighborhoods have experienced a dramatic increase in demand for new development, a demand that is likely to continue with the anticipated extension of the Green Line through the City. In this context, historic preservation, coupled with zoning regulations and building permit enforcement, can serve as a vital tool to help Somerville manage change, in order to retain the quality of life within its strong neighborhoods.

Historically, each one of Somerville's neighborhoods has its own identity. That identity is based upon a variety of factors, including its geographical boundaries and its commercial center, and very significantly by its buildings. In a sense, a neighborhood is experienced through its buildings, their scale, proportions, architectural detail, and materials. Therefore, the present effort to designate a sizable group of Somerville's buildings as locally "historic" is especially important and timely, given the intense development pressures currently bombarding the community and its individual neighborhoods. The purpose of the proposed historic designations is not to freeze development nor to prevent any changes, but rather to ensure that new construction and additions are sensitive to the individual property and its streetscape, and that exterior alterations visible to the public do not destroy the overall character and identity of Somerville's distinctive neighborhoods.

In Somerville a local historic district is an area officially designated by the City that contains one or more buildings or structures on one or more parcels or lots of land. Each structure has been surveyed and determined to have architectural or historical significance to the community. Somerville is a pioneer in the creation of single-building districts, beginning in 1985, and this pattern continues to be proposed. Our recent surveying effort once again finds that many of the City's most architecturally and historically significant sites are scattered throughout the community, rather than clustered in a few discrete areas. For this reason approximately one third of the properties (fifty-two (52)) are proposed as single-building districts under the Historic Districts Ordinance of 1985. Another eighteen (18) new districts and seventeen (17) enlarged existing districts are proposed as multiple building districts, encompassing properties located within five different neighborhoods. Regardless of size, however, each district meets the same designation criteria as is specified under Chapter 40C for the creation of a historic district.

Although many of the properties within this Report have been previously surveyed and listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NR), this project is only focused upon their designation as local historic districts (LHDs). This is because listing on the National Register provides only limited protection from historically inappropriate alterations, namely when federal or state funds are involved. In contrast, alterations to the exterior of properties within LHDs are subject to review by the local preservation commission, a body that helps owners to appreciate the historical value of their property and to make alterations that are consistent with the property's historic character.

Local Historic Districts were first established in Massachusetts in 1955, and since then have been created in over 215 communities throughout the State. All of the communities adjacent to Somerville's borders, and most within the Boston Metropolitan Area, have also locally designated historic properties due to their many perceived benefits.

In Somerville there are multiple benefits of local historic districts. Case studies and researchers in the Boston area, as well as throughout the nation, have found that historic designation often improves property values and stabilizes neighborhoods. In part, this is because the designation protects owners from wide and sometimes wild fluctuations in the marketplace. It also gives confidence to the owner that their investment will not be undermined by inappropriate alterations either to their own house over time or to their neighbors'. Historic designation of a group of properties can help protect a neighborhood against inappropriate development, preserving the character of its architecture and its quality of life. The presence of designated Local Historic Districts also appeals to and assures potential buyers that the attractive qualities of a neighborhood will be protected over the longer term.

On a community-wide scale historic districts create a sense of place and preserve architecture that attracts new homebuyers, as well as businesses, jobs, and tourist dollars. Designated historic areas encourage public and private investment, and reinforce citizens' perception that they live in a city that cares about itself and its residents. Historic designation encourages thoughtful, well-planned building design and site development. The inventory that underlies the creation of historic districts provides invaluable information to citizens and local officials seeking to promote local pride and participation. The historical research about each property and the surrounding area also helps teachers and librarians to develop educational material, describing the significant role that Somerville played in the development and growth of the region, as well as the founding of our nation. This material can be an invaluable tool to local schools, libraries, and other resource centers.

In sum, the designation of local historic districts preserves and protects the historical attributes of older architecture in the City, inspires greater investment in the community, and promotes widespread appreciation of local history that in turn increases civic pride.